

# YIDDISH

## THE **LIVING** LANGUAGE OF THE **JEWISH** PEOPLE

by **ROKHL KAFRISSEN**

*A Jew of my acquaintance sat down near me in a Warsaw park and asked me why I was so sad.*

*“Graetz is dead,” I answered.*

*“God’s will!” said my acquaintance. “One of our townsfolk, I suppose?”*

*...When I informed my neighbor that Graetz was an historian who wrote the history of the Jewish people he commented:*

*“Oh history!” His voice had the same ring as if he were told that somebody had eaten a dozen hard-boiled eggs at one time.*

*Just as I was about to get angry, he continued very naively:*

*“And what’s the use of history?”*

*— From I.L. Peretz, On History  
(Translated and Edited by Sol Liptzin, 1947)*

I love this passage from Peretz’s *On History*, and not just because it shows that Peretz had a deliciously dark sense of humor. Substitute “Yiddish” for “History” and you’ll find a familiar bit of dialogue taken from my life as an evangelical (*lehavdil*) Yiddishist. Much of the Jewish world is, inexplicably, committed to the notion of the uselessness of Yiddish. Am I crazy? Or are they? (Wait, don’t answer that yet.)

As an experiment, I set a Google alert for “Yiddish.” Every day, Google sends me a long list of pages that make some reference to Yiddish. And nine times out of ten, the articles feature some permutation of “dead,” “dying,” “wiped out” or “kaddish.” It’s no surprise I’ve started unconsciously checking my pulse.

Google is usually right. But when it comes to Yiddish, I think one has to look a little bit deeper. So, what is the use of Yiddish? As Peretz would probably agree, we have to know our history and the history of Yiddish as a language of the Jewish people.

For centuries, Ashkenazic Jewry took a

very un-Jewish language and made it very Jewish. German bumped up against *Loshn-koydesh* (biblical Hebrew and Aramaic) in the formation of Yiddish, just as Jews and Christians encountered each other in real life. Jewish communities were self-contained and self-governing, with the Talmud providing the infrastructure of daily life. And yet, no matter how much their lives differed, Jews always interacted with their non-Jewish neighbors. Perhaps, like me, you had the same revelation upon visiting Poland for the first time. Borscht? Polish. Kasha varnishkes? Yup, that too. And don’t get me started on the caraway seeds. Jewish culture was in constant dialog with its neighbors, above and beyond the culinary. But Yiddish — both the language and the culture — was the fence erected by Jews around themselves to control that dialog and protect the integrity of the community.

Through prosperity and peril, Yiddish was the buffer and filter that helped the Jews of Ashkenaz to flourish in non-Jewish lands. Like a Jewish photosynthesis, Yiddish took in the goyish and made it Jewish, constantly renewing Jewish culture and Jewish life. The most moving Hasidic *nigunim* (wordless tunes) began life as (non-Jewish) shepherd’s tunes, beer hall songs and even national anthems. Noted Yiddish historian Michael Wex talks about how the Yiddish term *gezeygenen zikh* (to bid farewell) actually comes from a Latin (and then German) term meaning to cross oneself.

Yiddish allowed the Jews of Europe to live in a non-Jewish place and to absorb non-Jewish culture without fear. Yiddish was always on, always performing its peculiar alchemy, making everything, even the sign of the cross, Jewish.

Then along came modernity, and the *Haskole*, or Jewish Enlightenment. Jews were free to become, for example, Germans of the Mosaic faith, as long as they could leave behind those Jewish characteristics not universal or religious.

Modernity seemed to demand that Jewishness be shrunk down to a religion, segregated to its appointed places (specifically the

synagogue) and mostly shorn of its own languages. Alas, there is no universal. There is only the individual, the detail, the particular. What else is Jewishness than a culture of distinctions and details?

Where assimilation was somewhat more difficult, as in Poland, the Yiddish intelligentsia attempted to create a modern Jewishness, one that didn’t demand such a high price of entry as that of the German reformers. I.L. Peretz’s Warsaw was one of the nodes on the new map of Yiddish modernism, and it glowed with the interchange of energies between worlds, traditional and modern, rural and urban, Jewish and non.

As the Jewish people of Eastern Europe became more varied (economically, politically, religiously), Yiddish, too, became more varied, growing to accommodate new Jews and new Jewish lives. And rather than shrinking Jewishness down to fit into synagogue time and synagogue space, modern Yiddish culture expanded to fill the lives of modern Jews streaming into urban centers. Whether or not they ever stepped foot in a shul, the lives of the Yiddish modernists were suffused with Jewishness — in their books, their songs, their cabarets and even their political movements. By speaking Yiddish, these modernists were never far from *Loshn-koydesh*, and the Jewish point of view, no matter how far they traveled. The Yiddish modernists (as well as plain old modern Yiddish speakers) were on their way to creating a truly liberating, modern Jewish culture, one in which different kinds of Jewish lives, secular and observant, enriched each other and moved each other forward. Sadly, we all know what happened next. It’s true, as Google reminds me each morning, that the world in which my beloved Yiddish modernists lived was ruthlessly destroyed, wiped out, *is no more*.

And yet, the majority of American Jews come from Yiddish speaking backgrounds. Jewish popular culture in the U.S. is largely a product of Yiddish and Yiddish culture. One-third of Jewish all-day schools in the United States today use Yiddish as their main medium of teaching (Joshua A. Fishman, *Can Threatened Languages Be Saved*, Multilingual Matters Limited, 2001). According to the latest New York City census, there are about 82,000 Yiddish speakers in New York City. Contrast this with the approximately 48,000 Arabic speakers and 50,000 Hebrew speakers in the city. Yiddish is both our immediate history as well as a living part of the Jewish people. Personally, I learned more about Jewishness in four semesters of college Yiddish than I did in years of Conservative Hebrew school. If we are truly interested in strengthening Jewish life and culture, we would do well to understand the unique stature of Yiddish as a language of the Jewish People. We should think twice before writing off millions of Jews, and the history of millions more, as irrelevant. ■

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